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The greatest mathematician

Every kind of genius, in fact, is confronted with the awesome feeling that there is a Being greater than himself at work in the universe. It is a measure of his own greatness that he can bow to Another who is infinitely greater.

“God is really another artist,” said Picasso, “He invented the giraffe, the elephant and the cat.” Einstein once observed that God was subtle, not malicious, and very clever. Sir Michael Francis Atiyah, the distinguished mathematician, said on a recent visit to Bombay that God was a mathematician – not exactly a new idea, since Sir James had seriously put forward the idea – half a century ago that the universe was the work of a mathematician, while centuries before that Pythagoras had come to the conclusion that all things were numbers. The greatest of human mathematicians have come across such complexities in their subjects that they have finally understood the meagreness of their own grasp of the subject. Every kind of genius, in fact, is confronted with the awesome feeling that there is a Being greater than himself at work in the universe. It is a measure of his own greatness that he can bow to Another who is infinitely greater.

Those who do not recognise the signs of God throughout the universe are spiritually blind, and those who see them, but still do not believe in God, will suffer from a warping of the soul which will leave them morally stunted for all of their lives. God conveys His message in innumerable ways, but it is only those who are genuinely receptive to it who will receive His eternal blessings.

Initial preparation

One can never satisfactorily reach one's ultimate destination without passing through and giving due attention to all of the preliminary stages.

One of the innumerable processes of the textile industry is the dyeing of fabric. For instance, most saris are originally woven in the natural colour of cotton and then dyed to make them attractive. Dyeing, however, is never done by dipping the woven saris straight into a cauldron of colour, because it takes a great deal more than this to make the colour uniform and permanent. Before dyeing, pre-treatment is necessary. Only then can the cloth go through the processes of dyeing, printing and finishing. In fact, statistics show that 70 per cent of all the defects occurring in dyed finished fabrics are traceable to the imperfect preparation of the base material.

Different kinds of pre-treatment, such as desizing, scouring and bleaching are carried out to remove any inherent or added matter in the cotton which would adversely affect its absorbency and whiteness.

Mercerizing enhances the accessibility and reactivity of cotton cellulose.

The characteristics possessed by cotton and the cloth made from it have been directly, invested in them by God. The physical rules governing them are, therefore, universal and invariable, and it is only by accepting them as such that man can take the right steps in the correct order to make the clothes of his choice. In this, God gives us a clear sign as to how we should construct our lives. That is, we cannot jump to the later, more refined stages, without going through all the processes of pre-treatment.' It is only when the initial conditions have been fulfilled that we can proceed to the next stage to achieve the desired success. One can never satisfactorily reach one's ultimate destination without passing through and giving due attention to all of the preliminary stages.

Arriving at the truth

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Without this, we cannot, otherwise arrive at the truth.*

In 1859, Charles Darwin (1809-1882) published his now celebrated *Origin of Species* in which he put forward the very curious theory that human beings have evolved from animals. Now, man is outstandingly different from other living species. How could the amoeba's brain have conceivably developed into the human brain? Darwin himself felt uneasy about this notion, and he writes in the final chapter of his book: "Can the mind of man, which has, as I fully believe, been developed from a mind as low as that possessed by the lowest animals, be trusted when it draws such grand conclusions? I cannot pretend to throw the least light on such abstruse problems." It must be conceded that the interpretation of life and the universe is a matter of such magnitude and complexity, that it almost defies the imagination even to contemplate it. No man, with the limiting factors of his purely human (as opposed to supernatural) abilities and an ineluctable mortality which puts an untimely end to all endeavours, can be equal to the task. The conditions of human existence in this world simply do not equip him to undertake so monumental a pursuit. Those who bravely embark upon it, cannot but be assailed by persistent doubts on the question of human limitations. Some, like Darwin, accept that this must be so. Some do not.

Self-doubt is in itself a proof that if we are to penetrate the mysteries of life and the universe, our thinking must of necessity be on a higher plane than that of which we are humanly capable. In the last analysis, it is only God who is capable of such thought, and if we are to have access to His thinking, it can only be through His messengers. It is our own cerebral shortcomings which show us the necessity for prophetic guidance. Without this, we cannot, otherwise arrive at the truth.

Thinking of God in moments of crisis

'Ali, the son of Abu Talib, relates how Fatima, his wife, and also daughter of the Prophet had to do all the housework herself. Her hands used to become blistered from working a millstone, her clothes became dirty from sweeping the floor, and having to bring water from outside in a large leather bag had left a mark on her neck. On one occasion when the Prophet had had an influx of servants, 'Ali suggested to Fatima that she go and request her father to give her one of them to help her in her work. She duly went to see him, but there were many people gathered at his house, and she returned home, without having been able to meet him. The next day the Prophet came to the house of 'Ali and Fatima and asked what it was she had wanted to discuss with him, but Fatima remained silent. Then 'Ali told the Prophet the whole story. The Prophet did not, however, accede to their request for a servant. "Fear God," he said, "and fulfill your duty to the Lord. Continue to do your housework and, when you go to bed at night, glorify God 33 times, praise Him the same number of times and exalt him 34 times. That makes 100 times altogether. That will do you more good than a servant will." (*Al- Targheeb wa al- Tarheeb*)

Never say die

Those who forget what has been destroyed, and concentrate on what they still have, can achieve wonders, provided they have the determination to do so.

Mr. Stanley L. Jaki, a Hungarian-born Benedictine monk, theologian and physics professor, says losing his voice for ten years helped him win a \$220,000 prize for his writings on science and faith. "A surgical mishap on my throat in 1953 gave me time to write and to think, and that's not always the case. Many writers of best-sellers don't think at all," the scholar said. Mr. Jaki, who won the Templeton prize for progress in religion, holds that Christianity created the intellectual climate which allowed science to flourish. He is a stem critic of the view that science and God are unrelated. (*The Times of India*, New Delhi May 14, 1987). Those who do nothing but lament their losses only push themselves further towards total ruination. But those who, like Mr. Jaki, forget what has been destroyed, and concentrate on what they still have, can achieve wonders, provided they have the determination to do so.

Social history is full of examples of the blind, the deaf and the dumb having successful careers, the most notable of whom was Helen Keller, the now celebrated American who was blind and deaf mute. Born on June 27, 1880, she lost the senses of sight, hearing and smell when only 19 months old. She had the good fortune to be aided by Anna Sullivan of the Perkins Institute of the Blind, who taught her to read by the deaf and dumb alphabet, and also to write and typewrite. In 1890, she learned to speak, going on to graduate with honours at Radcliffe college, Cambridge, Massachusetts. She wrote several books including *The Story of My Life*, 1903, and *The World I Live In*, 1908. In 1932 she visited Scotland to receive honorary degrees at the universities.

Religious liberty in Islam

In 1948 the United Nations gave the world its Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a charter of what human beings in all walks of life could claim as theirs as a matter of fundamental human dignity. Article 18 of this declaration reads as follows:

Everyone has the right of freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

These ideas are exactly in accordance with the principles of Islamic teaching, for in Islam man's intellectual development is firmly believed in, and any system which favours intellectual development will, of necessity, uphold freedom of thought. Without this it is impossible for there to be any fruitful development of the human personality.

But what is perhaps even more important is the Islamic concept of the predetermination of the course taken by all inanimate objects and by all of God's creatures except man. Man is held to be born free while every other animate or inanimate object is subservient to God's will. There is nothing in the heavens or on earth which can decide upon the course of its own existence, this having been eternally predetermined while everything in the physical world – save man – must follow the path laid down by God, only man has been granted the freedom of choice and the power to take matters into his own hands, and make his own decisions.

Islam requires man to make his own quest for the truth. This is something of which he should be fully conscious and which he should impose upon himself as a matter of religious duty. This is the only way that true nobility of character can come into being. Externally given commands are meant for robots, not for fully mature human beings.

Real, alive, human beings cannot ever come into existence in an atmosphere of blinkered constraint. What truly moves the human psyche above all is the feeling in individuals that their achievements have been the result of their own personal deliberations. The opinions they have arrived at are their own. The beliefs on which they base their actions are the outcome of their own deep reflections. It is this freedom of choice that can lead to their being fully integrated personalities.

Here I shall make a few references to Islamic teachings, which I hope will bear out the above contentions.

AHEAD OF THE TIME

When Islam came into the world in the seventh century A.D., it was a time when religious persecution was prevalent, but it is noteworthy that it remained uninfluenced by the common practices of the time. Islam, running counter to the age, proclaimed religious freedom. Although a missionary religion, it was against any imposition of restrictions on human thought, which meant that there should be no forced conversion. In his book, *The Preaching of Islam*, Professor T.W. Arnold has gone into considerable detail to show that under Islamic rule, other religions were allowed full freedom. He writes, inter alia, for the provinces of the Byzantine empire that were rapidly acquired by the prowess of Muslims found themselves in the enjoyment of a toleration such as, on account of their Monophysite and Nestorian opinions, had been unknown to them for centuries. They were allowed the free and undisturbed exercise of their religion. The extent of this toleration – so striking in the history of the seventh century – may be judged from the terms granted to the conquered cities. (p. 56)

COMPULSION IMPERMISSIBLE

According to the Qur'an, 'There is no compulsion in religion. The right direction is now distinct from error. Whoever rejects evil and believes in God has grasped the firmest handle that will never break.' (2:256).

The verse of the Qur'an expresses the fundamental principle of Islam, according to which, if a person believes in the truth of something, he has every right to proclaim it as such, provided that he supports it by logical arguments. His task is complete once he has described his belief in the clearest possible way. But he has no right to compel others to accept it. Whoever accepts the truth does so for his own benefit and whoever denies it does harm only to himself.

FREEDOM FOR ALL

Likewise, the Qur'an states:

Say, the truth is from your Lord. Let him who will believe it, and let him who will reject it (18:29).

This also clearly expresses the notion that truth is something which should be accepted or rejected by one's own decision, and not something which should be imposed upon one. The resulting belief is valid only as being the outcome of one's own conscious decision. It is the very negation of truth to force its acceptance upon unwilling or unprepared individuals. Truth can be accepted as such only when man's reason, his intellect attests to its being so. The imposition by force of a truth to which one's reason fails to testify brings about not the recognition of truth but the recognition of force. It is an insult to truth itself if people are bludgeoned into accepting it.

NO ONE SHOULD ASSUME THE RIGHT TO BE ANOTHER'S KEEPER

A preacher's mission is to convey the truth to the members of his congregation. And once he had done that, he has fulfilled his religious obligation. It is not part of his task to compel others to accept what he says. It is significant that in the Qur'an God thus admonishes the Prophet: 'Remind them, for you are only one of the warners. You are not at all a warder over them (88:21-22).

This shows how different are the respective roles of the preacher and his hearers. It is the task of the preachers to convey the word of God, but his hearers have the right to reject his message. The most that the preacher can do to convince his hearers that he brings them the truth is to offer them strictly logical arguments. He must never stoop to coercion. God has never given His preachers this right.

RESPECT FOR THE RELIGION OF OTHERS

Certain of the companions of the Prophet of Islam, in their zeal to propagate the new faith, began to abuse those who worshipped other gods besides God. But this incurred God's displeasure, and the following verse was revealed in the Quran:

Do not revile the idols which they invoke besides God, lest in their ignorance they should spitefully revile God (6:108).

The freedom of religion advocated in this verse can be explained as a policy of mutual benefit. If we want to have freedom for ourselves, the price we must pay is the granting of the same right of freedom to others. There can be no exclusivity about freedom if there is to be justice in this world. Only if we grant others their legal rights, will they be willing to reciprocate in like manner. But if we abuse or coerce them, we should expect to have the same treatment at their hands. The result would be that there would be no religious freedom whatsoever regardless of whether society were of only two or of multiple religious persuasions.

The fact that Islam is an upholder of religious freedom, in the fullest sense of the term, is so obvious that even those who are averse to it have not hesitated to testify to it. We shall quote here some instances which bear this out. After the defeat of Muslims in Spain at the hands of Christians a royal decree was issued by Spain's Christian ruler, Philip II, ordering the forcible re-conversion of Spanish Muslims (Moriscoes) to Christianity. But the Archbishop of Valencia favoured the extreme step of expulsion rather than forced conversion and, in an account of the Apostacies and Treasons of Moriscoes, in 1602, in which he makes this recommendation to the king, he sets forth one of his principal reasons for wishing to banish the Muslims: "That they commended nothing so much as that liberty of conscience, in all matters of religion, which the Turks and all other Mohamadans, suffer their subject to enjoy' (T.W. Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam*, p. 144).

It is noteworthy that by the time of the last expulsion in 1610, over 500,000 people had been affected. In earlier times when religious freedom was inconceivable to any faith, neither Christianity nor Judaism

nor Buddhism permitted any freedom. Yet even the opponents of Islam could not but appreciate the religious liberty offered to all faiths under Islamic rule. Again in seventeenth century, on an occasion when fearful atrocities had been inflicted by Catholic Poles on the Russians of the Orthodox Eastern Church, Macarius, the Patriarch of Antioch, bewailing the cruel martyrdom of 70 to 80 thousand innocent souls, said, 'God perpetuate the empire of the Turks for ever and ever! For they take their impost and enter into no account of religion, be their subjects Christians or Nazarenes, Jews or Samaritans.' (Ibid., pp. 156-157)

Another remarkable example of religious tolerance was set by Uzbek Khan who was leader of the Golden Horde from 1313 to 1340, and who distinguished himself by his proselytising zeal. It was his mission to spread the faith of Islam throughout the whole of Russia, but although the Mongols were paramount in Russia for two centuries, they exercised very little influence in the people of that country. T.W. Arnold, in his book, *The Preaching of Islam*, says that, "It is noticeable, moreover, that in spite of his zeal for the spread of his own faith, Uzbek Khan was very tolerant towards his Christian subjects, who were left undisturbed and even allowed to pursue their missionary labours in his territory.

One of the most remarkable documents of Muhammadan toleration is the charter that Uzbek Khan granted to the Metropolitan Peter in 1313. He then goes on to give the highly specific details of this lengthy charter which gave every conceivable protection to Christians, their institutions, and their way of life.

"Their laws, their Churches; their monasteries and chapels shall be respected; whoever condemns or blames this religion, shall not be allowed to excuse himself under any pretext but shall be punished with death". Arnold later points that these were no empty words and "that the toleration here promised became a reality may be judged from a letter sent to the Khan by Pope John XXII in 1318, in which he thanks the Muslim prince for the favour he showed to his Christian subjects and the kind treatment they received at his hands." Ibid., pp. 240-241).

A similar contrast was made in 1605 by Richard Staper, an English merchant who had been in Turkey as early as 1578: "And notwithstanding that the Turks in general be a most wicked people, walking in the world of darkness... Yet notwithstanding do they permit all Christians, both Greeks and Latins, to live in their religion and freely to use their conscience, allowing them churches for their divine service, both in Constantinople and very many other places, whereas to the contrary by proof of twelve years' residence in Spain I can truly affirm, we are not only forced to observe their popish ceremonies, but in danger of life and goods" (M. Epstein, *The Early History of the Levant Company*, p. 157, London 1908).

PERMITTING NON-MUSLIMS TO WORSHIP IN MOSQUES

How far Islam goes along the road to religious freedom is made clear by an event which occurred in the Prophet's lifetime. The famous eighth century biographer, Ibn Ishaq, records how a

delegation of Yemenese Christians came to see the Prophet of Islam and had a long dialogue with him in his mosque in Medina, which went on until the Christian's hour for prayer. They then expressed a desire to worship there, according to their own rites, in this mosque which is considered by Muslims to be second in importance only to the Masjid-e-Haram in Mecca.

Tradition has it that they were beginning their orations when one of the Muslims attempted to stop them from praying in the Christian way. But the Prophet intervened, and asked him to refrain from interrupting them, and they were thus permitted to complete their prayers inside the mosque.

GUARDING AGAINST EVEN REMOTE POSSIBILITIES OF INFRINGING THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS

Islam gives such serious consideration to religious freedom that it takes pains to avoid infractions of it which exist only in the realms of remote possibility. There is an incident in Islamic history which illustrates this point with great pertinence. Palestine having been conquered in 16 AH (638 AD), Umar Faruq, the second Caliph, travelled to Palestine at the request of the Christians in order to finalize the agreements between them and the Muslims. T.W. Arnold in his book, *The Preaching of Islam*, relates how 'In company with the Patriarch, Umar visited the holy places, and it is said while they were in the Church of the Resurrection, as it was the appointed hour of prayers, the Patriarch bade the Caliph offer his prayers there, but he thoughtfully refused, saying that if he were to do so, his followers might afterwards claim it as a place of Muslim worship' (p. 57).

He obviously foresaw later generations of Muslims might feel inspired to attempt to build a mosque on that very spot, thus setting up restrictions upon religious freedom. This discretion shown by Umar is all the more remarkable for his having been the ruler of Palestine at that time and, therefore, in a position to do anything he wished. A man with less insight and forethought would have regarded his praying inside the Church as an apparently harmless event and one which could in no way be interpreted as depriving anyone of his rights. Umar, in fact, moved a stone's throw away, and said his prayers at a discreet distance from the Church. Muslims did indeed come to this city later on, and, as he had foreseen, they built their mosque at the exact point where he had said his prayers. The mosque exists to this day, but presents no obstacle to Christian worship.

It is true that in later times certain excessively zealous Muslims converted a number of non-Muslim places of worship into mosques. But such actions, far from being an application of the teaching of Islam are to be deplored as deviations from it. Says Arnold, 'But such oppression was contrary to the tolerant spirit of Islam.' (p. 77). Islam, in actual fact, is the name given to teachings of the Qur'an and the Hadith, and the finest example of living up to this standard was set by the Prophet and his companions. The deeds of later generations, when judged by these primary criteria, will be seen to be sadly deficient in true Islamic spirit. Those who make no attempt to live up to the Prophet's example are in no way representative of Islam.

On the question of religious tolerance, everyone must be granted the right to present his thoughts, and to be given a quiet hearing. This does not mean, however, that everyone is right, and that Islam believes in the manyness of truth. On the contrary, Islam believes in the oneness of reality. Even so, the truth is not something to be forced upon one, but something which one is gently assisted to go in quest of as a matter of personal discovery. In this respect, Islam is the greatest upholder of religious freedom.

15 June 1994

WORDS OF THE PROPHET

By Maulana Wahiduddin Khan

The present volume is an anthology compiled from the Hadith, an Islamic source book second only to the Qur'an in religious importance. Although brief, it covers, directly or indirectly, the more important aspects of the Hadith's teachings.

The sayings of the Prophet Muhammad have been handed down to posterity through both oral and written traditions, the foundations of which were laid by the Prophet's Companions, some of whom were also his scribes. The following are some of them sought to guide his followers. Eternal in essence, they are of value not only to Muslims, but to humanity at large.

The mirror of the mind

The Prophet Muhammad (may peace be upon him), taught the truth, and nothing but the truth. Yet, in his early days in Mecca, when he visited Taif, he found that the people there were unwilling to accept the truths he brought to them. Their reasoning in this was of the shallowest. They felt that great truths could not be at the behest of someone who appeared so insignificant and so low in rank as the Prophet. The Jews likewise reviled him out of their own mistaken sense of superiority. The Emperor Heraclius, on the other hand, did recognize the truth of Islam, yet he rejected it because he did not want to suffer isolation from his people. Similarly, Abu Jahal fiercely opposed the Prophet because concern for his own power and position came between himself and truth.

We tend to consider the human mind a mirror of reality. But is it really so? The reflections thrown back by it, are so often distorted by pride, conceit, attachment to the material things of life, and by preconceived ideas which no amount of reasoning can correct. But surely, when we have to grapple with the truth, we should so burnish the mirror of the mind that the image it reflects is untarnished by any such base motivations. When reality is placed before this mirror, its every detail should be reproduced in totality with the most scrupulous and persevering exactitude.

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Whatever happens is the will of God

When certain people offered to guard 'Ali (the fourth Caliph), the son of Abu Talib, the latter replied, "Destiny is man's guardian." According to another tradition, he said, "No man will taste the joy of faith until he realizes that he could never have escaped what has befallen him, nor enjoyed what escaped him." (Abu Da'ud, *Sunan*)

The external reality

The true meaning of Islam is the guidance of man by God. Just as man requires a constant supply of the Sun's light to sustain his material existence, so does he require God's constant guidance for the moral sustenance of his spiritual life.

It has been seriously claimed that religion has been rendered outmoded and unnecessary by modern civilization. But what actual contribution has western civilization made to humanity? New modes of travel, new architectural designs, new means of communication, new styles of clothes. In short, commodities and conveniences have become more luxurious, more glamorous, more effective than ever before. The question we must ask ourselves is what the existence of such amenities has to do with belief in God and religion.

Does the possession of a modern house and a luxury car turn belief in God into a meaningless cipher? Do telegraphic and telephonic means of communication leave no room for belief in inspirational forms of revelatory transmission? Does the ability to fly in the earth's atmosphere and beyond preclude the possibility of an afterworld in the cosmos? Does the availability of gourmet food, high-fashion clothes and elegantly designed furniture reduce belief in the Garden of Paradise and the Fire of Hell to things of the past? Does the fact that women can move their fingers daintily over their typewriter keyboards nullify this Qur'anic verse: "Men are in command over Women?" Does the legislative capacity of certain individuals seated in grandiose parliament buildings invalidate the guidelines of the Shariah? While acknowledging the importance and utility of modern technology and its resultant amenities we fail to comprehend in what way these things verify or negate religious truths.

The relevance of religion is its concern with fundamental values rather than- with social manifestations. Social phenomena undergo constant changes, whereas the values of life are immutable. Although fast, modern forms of transport have replaced their slower forerunners, it does not mean that the ethics of vehicle manufacture and use are thereby invalidated. Modern means of communication may have rendered the older methods obsolete, but whether these facilities should be utilized to convey truth or falsehood is as pertinent a question as ever it was.

Whether M Ps go to work on foot or by helicopter does not alter the fact that they are bound to fashion laws in accordance with the Divine Order which rules the entire cosmos. Whether they are housed in huts or in magnificent buildings, judicial bodies are still bound to mete out justice by the same absolute standards so that the innocent are upheld and the guilty punished.

Speaking of 'Islam in modern times' has, as little meaning as referring to 'the sun in modern times.' The true meaning of Islam is the guidance of man by God, and, being an eternal reality, is unaffected by considerations of modernity or antiquity. Just as man requires a constant supply of the sun's light to sustain his material existence, so does he require God's constant guidance for the moral sustenance of his spiritual life. Rejecting Islam is like eliminating the sun from the list of human priorities. Just as the world would be plunged into darkness, chaos and ultimate extinction without the light of the sun so will the Hereafter be plunged in eternal gloom and damnation without the divine guidance of the Almighty.

Striking a balance

Excess in religion actually produces the antithesis of religion. Innocent in intention, it is far from being innocuous in effect.

A gentleman by the name of Qamruddin, who was from the same part of the country as myself, being a very devout person, was extremely regular in his prayers and fasting. But the strange thing about him was that he generally found it difficult to reach the mosque in time for the congregational prayers on a Friday. His intimates knew, of course, that he was delayed, not by sloth, but by his being over-particular about the bath laid down by Islamic law. So extreme were his views that, whenever he started bathing on a Friday morning, he would be beset by doubts about his thoroughness, and, agonizing over which parts of his body he might have missed, would repeatedly bathe all over again, much to his own inconvenience. Sometimes he would become so distraught that his tears would mingle with the bath water.

This self-doubting attitude was quite unnecessary, for, although one should always be punctilious about religious duties, it should be borne in mind that the Qur'an, addressing the People of the Book, says quite specifically, "Exceed not in your religion." (5:77). Excess in religion actually produces the antithesis of religion. Innocent in intention, it is far from being innocuous in effect.

Worship of God is one of obligatory observances laid down by Islam. But, supposing a worshipper every night spent the whole night reciting the Qur'an, this would amount not to devotion, but to excess. Islam approves of one having a sense of honour, but if this developed to the point where one were loth to accept the truth if it detracted from one's honour, this too would be considered excessive.

Respect for men of learning is also taught by Islam, but if this is interpreted to mean that they should never be subjected to criticism, this likewise would be a form of excess.

It should be appreciated that religious fervour alone does not make an action acceptable in the eyes of God. It is also essential that one's actions should be free from phobias and fanaticism, for only then will they conform to the commandments of God and His Prophet.

Qualities of leadership

In the context of his relationship with the Caliph Umar, Abdullah ibn Abbas says that he served him better even than the members of his own household, and that “he used to seat me next to him and showed me great respect.” He relates how one day when he was alone with him in his home, he suddenly heaved such a deep sigh that it was as if he was about to surrender his soul. Abdullah enquired, “Is it because of some apprehension that you heave this sigh?” “It is indeed,” he replied, and asking Abdullah to come nearer, he told him that he did not know of anyone capable of taking on ‘this work’ – by which he meant the Caliphate. Abdullah ibn Abbas then mentioned six names, and asked the Caliph if he did not know them. Umer commented on each one of them in turn and then said: “One who is firm but not overbearing, soft but not miserly – only such a person is fit for this task.” According to Abdullah ibn Abbas, only Umer ibn al-Khattab himself possessed all these qualities.

(Kanz al-Ummal)

Position of Woman in Shari'ah – 2

THE EXAMPLE OF MUSLIM WOMEN

Just as men function on different planes of religiosity, so do women have their own separate spheres of religious effectiveness.

Let us first consider their everyday level of existence on which adherence to their religion broadly means paying the dues of God and men in purely personal matters. In particular, it means true belief in God and the carrying out of His commandments; strict adherence to justice in all worldly transactions; withstanding the temptations of the self as instigated by Satan; paying what is due to God in terms of one's wealth and life; giving the Hereafter priority over the present world; being guided by Islamic ethics in dealing with one's family, relatives and friends; invariably dealing with all matters in the manner approved of by Islam.

Next in importance to these feminine duties is the training and nurturing of children. Most women become mothers, and the relationship between mother and child is of the utmost importance, because the mother's influence can be used for ends which may be good or evil depending upon the mother's own proclivities. As a Muslim of course, it is clearly her duty to use her maternal influence to bring her children up as moral beings. If they have deviated from the path of moral rectitude, it is her duty to reform them. Everything that she does, in fact, should be for their betterment.

Another domestic imperative is that the woman who is both wife and mother should organize her own and her family's lives in such a way that they are free of problems. She herself should never create difficulties for her husband and children. In many cases, knowing 'what not to do' is more important than knowing 'what to do.' In such matters, women are liable to err because they are more emotional by nature. By creating unnecessary problems for their husbands and children, they destroy the peace and quiet of home life. Sometimes they unwittingly slip into wrong ways of thinking; they have all the necessities of life, but these things, perhaps because they have been attained without a struggle, gradually cease to please them. Then they begin to feel that there are so many things lacking in their lives and their own dissatisfaction begins to vitiate what had formerly been a healthy, familial atmosphere. Regardless of whatever else a woman does, if she can simply refrain from creating problems of this nature, she will to a large extent have succeeded in creating a wholesome, domestic atmosphere and a happy family circle.

On a higher plane, it is possible for talented women to further the cause of religion when the right opportunity presents itself. There are innumerable examples in Islamic history of such work having been successfully carried out by women.

A notable example is that of 'Aishah, an extremely intelligent woman who was one of the Prophet's wives. Being much younger than he was, she survived him by about fifty years, and, with her excellent, almost photographic memory, was able to continue to communicate in great detail everything that she had learned from him during their very close companionship. So that for about half a century she was able to fulfill a highly informative role. In short, she became a living cassette recorder for the *ummah*. Abdullah ibn al-'Abbas, a Companion of great stature, and one of the Qur'an's best commentators, was one of 'Aishah's pupils. The greater part of his knowledge of religion was learnt from her. Similarly, many other *Sahaba* (Companions of the Prophet) and *Tabi'un* (companions of the *Sahaba*) acquired their religious knowledge from her. So here we have the very fine example of a Muslim woman imparting to others the religious knowledge which she had imbibed directly from the Prophet.

There were other examples of Muslim women's intervention in religious matters, one of which occurred in the time of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second Caliph. It concerned the amount of money or goods which had to be given as dower (given by the husband to the wife at the time of marriage as a token that he will meet all her expenses in future). In the Prophet's lifetime this had been a very nominal amount, but with the increase in resources after the conquest of other countries, people had begun to apportion more substantial dowers. Feeling that this was an unhealthy trend, 'Umar once addressed an assembly of his people from the pulpit, saying that he did not know who had increased the amount of dower to more than 400 *dirhams*. The Prophet and his Companions handed over 400 *dirhams* or even less. Nobody should fix a dower of more than 400 *dirhams*. If it comes to my knowledge that anyone has exceeded this amount, I will confiscate the excess amount for the State Treasury.'

When he had had his say, a woman got up from one corner of the gathering and said, 'O Commander of the Faithful, is the Book of God (Qur'an) to be followed or what you have to say?' 'Umar replied that it was certainly the Book of God that was to be followed. The woman then retorted, 'You have just forbidden people to increase the amount of dower, whereas God says in His book: O believers, it is unlawful for you... to force them to give up a part of what you have given them...'¹

The woman had actually misquoted the text, but 'Umar did not choose to assert himself and simply said, 'Everyone knows more than 'Umar.'² With these words he relented on the question of the dower. This is a telling example of a woman successfully holding forth on a religious matter at a public gathering.

1. Qur'an, 4:20.
2. Al-Baihaq, *as-Sunan al-Kubra*, *Kitab as-Sudaq*, 7/533.

Another example of a woman making a signal contribution to the spread of religious learning is that of the daughter of Imam Abu Ja'far Tahavi, (229-321 AH) the famous Traditionist whose book, *Sharh Ma'ani al-Athar*, is regularly included in the syllabuses of Arabic schools. He dictated his book of traditions to his daughter and, as he read out the Hadith, he would explain its finer points to her and then she would write it all down. The whole book was prepared in this way. This is one of the finest examples of a woman helping her family members in matters of religion.

The above examples show the nature and extent of the contribution which can be made by believing Muslim women to the cause of Islam.

WOMANHOOD IN ISLAM

Fear of God and honouring one's fellow men – this is the twin foundation of Islam laid down in the Qur'an in these words:

Mankind, fear your Lord who created you from one soul and created man's mate from the same soul, from these two scattering on earth many men and women. Fear God, in whose name you entreat one another, and be careful not to sever your ties of kinship. Allah is watching over what you do.¹

1. Qur'an, 4:1.

The words, 'and created man's mate from the same soul' have been explained as meaning that first Adam was created from earth; then a rib was taken from his body, out of which Eve – his mate – was formed. But there is nothing in the Qur'an to support this theory. It is a biblical explanation, not a Qur'anic one. Here is what the Book of Genesis has to say about the creation of Eve:

And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof;

And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made hi woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of man.¹

1. Bible, Genesis, 2:21-23.

From this biblical tradition comes the theory that Eve was created from Adam's rib. This story has been given credence by some commentators of the Qur'an, who have used it to explain Eve's creation 'from the same soul as Adam.' But this notion does not stand up in the face of established fact, and it has been proven that, over the centuries, the Bible has been subjected to alteration and additions. Its present form is no longer as the prophets originally taught it. Along with prophetic inspiration, it has received a fair injection of human interpolation. For this reason, one cannot rely on explanations given in the Bible, nor is it proper to explain verses of the Qur'an in the light of biblical statements.

Neither in the verse of the Qur'an quoted above, nor in any other verse of the Qur'an, is there any mention of Eve having been created from Adam's rib. The Qur'an says only that Eve was created from 'it.' What this 'it' refers to is the point in question. Most of those commentators who have penetrated deep in to the meaning of the Qur'an have taken 'it' to refer to 'species': Eve was created – not from Adam himself – but from the same species as Adam. This is the explanation given – among others – Muslim Asfahani, and it is this explanation that fits in with other verses of the Qur'an.

In several verses of the Qur'an the word for 'soul' (*nafs*) has been used to mean 'species.' Such verses of the verse quoted above. A selection of them is given here:

God has created for you spouses, of your own kind. ¹

And of His signs is that He has created for you – of your own kind – spouses, that you might take comfort in them.²

Creator of the heavens and the earth: He has made for you spouses of your own kind, and the cattle He has also created in pairs.³

1. Qur'an, 16:72

2. Qur'an, 30:21.

3. Qur'an, 42:11.

From a perusal of these verses, one can see that the same word has been used for the spouses of ordinary human beings as was used for Adam's spouse in the verse quoted above. Just as Eve was created from Adam's *nafs*, so other women have also been created from the same *nafs* – or kind – as their male counterparts.

Clearly there is no question, in these other verses, of inferring that every female spouse has been created from the body of the male. There is no alternative but to take the word *nafs*, occurring in these verses, as meaning 'kind.' God has created for you spouses of your own kind, the Qur'an is telling us, in order that they may provide you with true companionship in your journey through life.

To summarize, women and men are from the same species. Biologically speaking, women have not been extracted from the bodies of their male counterparts. God fashioned them according to His Will, just as He fashioned men in accordance with His Almighty Will and Power.

SAYINGS OF THE PROPHET

Now we come to certain sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, in which the Arabic word *dil'* has been mentioned for the word 'rib'. The first thing that has to be remembered here is that these traditions are about ordinary women, and do not refer to the creation of Adam and Eve. It is the manner of every woman's creation that is being dealt with, not specifically that of Eve. One of the relevant sayings is as follows:

Treat women well, for they have been created from a rib.¹

1. Al-Bukhari, *Sahih, Kitab an-Nikah (Fath al-Bari, 9/207)*.

Now this cannot be taken to mean that women have actually been created from a rib, for this has no connection with the point conveyed in the rest of the sentence, which is that women should be treated

well. A correct interpretation of the word 'rib' has to be one that fits in with the underlying purpose behind the Prophet's statement.

The statement, 'women have been created from a rib,' should be taken metaphorically, not literally. What the Prophet wished to convey was this: 'Women are akin to a: rib and should be treated with due consideration.' There is another tradition which explains what this means. 'A woman is like a rib,' said the Prophet, 'If you try to straighten it, it will break.'²

2. Ibid., p. 206.

This saying of the Prophet Muhammad, related in the *Sahih* of both Bukhari and Muslim – the most authentic collections of traditions – makes it clear that women are like ribs; they are not actually created from ribs. The allusion is figurative not literal. Light is also cast on the meaning of the metaphor. Ribs break when one tries to straighten them. So it is with women. Rather than try to straighten them, it is better to let them be.

'Women have been created from ribs,' and 'Women are like ribs', are just two different ways of saying the same thing. There is a difference in the mode of expression of the two statements, but there is no difference in meaning. It is common in every language for metaphors to be expressed directly, without the use of the words 'like' or 'as.' For instance, if one wishes to pay tribute to a person's bravery, one can say that he is like a lion. But there is not as much force in saying that a person is 'like a lion' as there is in saying that he 'is a lion.' Examples of such usage abound in every languages, including English. A notable one is to be found in the poem, "Morte d' Arthur," by the celebrated poet, Alfred Lord Tennyson:

...More things are wrought by prayer
Than this world dreams of, wherefore, let thy voice,
Rise like a fountain for me night and day
For what are men better than sheep or goats
That nourish a blind life within the brain,
If knowing God, they lift not hands of prayer
Both for themselves and those who call them friend?
For so the whole round earth is every way
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.

In this last line the poet does not mean that the world is physically tethered to the feet of God by chains, but merely wishes to indicate the unbreakable bonds that exist between God and this world. In referring to the chains as 'golden,' he suggests the very great beauty and value of these bonds. By referring to the 'feet' of God, rather than any other part of Him, he suggests the humble position of man in God's divine

scheme. It is, indeed, a very rich metaphor. To return to the metaphor of the rib, in saying that if one tries to straighten a woman one will break her, the Prophet was referring to her delicate nature. Physically, women are weaker than men; psychologically, they are more highly strung, more prone to emotional upset. This is a fact of life which every one realizes, irrespective of whether he is educated or not. A father, for instance, will not be as hard on a daughter as he might be on his son, for he knows that boys are made of sterner stuff than girls. The latter tend to break under severe pressure. For this reason females are more prone to suicide than males. Sometimes a trivial matter can drive a woman to suicide, or cause her to have a nervous breakdown. In likening a woman to a rib, the Prophet was expressing this fact of life in metaphorical terms. Ribs have a slight curve in them. There is good reason for them to be made that way. They should be left in their natural state. No attempt should be made to straighten them. The Prophet used a parable to explain the delicacy of women's nature, pointing out that they should be treated in accordance with their nature. Their delicate emotional constitution should always be borne in mind. God has created them that way, and He has done so for good reason. They should be treated kindly. If they have to be told something, it should be done tactfully, in a gentle tone. Abruptness and severity will break them, as a rib is broken by any attempt to straighten it. Once, when the Prophet was on a journey, he saw some women riding on a camel. The man leading the camel made to drive the animal on faster, forgetting that this would cause undue discomfort to his passengers. So the Prophet said to the camel-driver: 'You have glass cases there. Be gentle with them.'¹

1. Al-Bukhari, *Sahih, Kitab al-Adab*, (*Fath al-Bari*, 10/454).

MODERN RESEARCH

In recent times, it has been accepted as fact, on a purely academic level, that fundamental, inborn differences do exist between men and women. A detailed article on the Status of Women in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* includes a section on 'Scientific Studies of Male-Female Differences.' Here the author points out physical differences in the respective constitutions of the male and female of the human species. 'With respect to personality traits,' he writes, 'men are characterized by greater aggressiveness, dominance and achievement motivation, women by greater dependency, a stronger social orientation, and the tendency to be more easily discouraged by failure than men.'¹

1. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1984), 19/907.

And there are a number of latter-day scientific experiments to back this up. Researchers have found greater dependence and docility in very young girls, greater autonomy and activity in boys. One such experiment was conducted in the U.S. When a barrier was set up to separate youngsters from their mothers, boys tried to knock it down; girls cried helplessly.

There are personality differences between the sexes too. Some distinctions turn up remarkably early. At New York University, for example, researchers have found that a female infant stops sucking a bottle and looks up when someone comes into the room; a male pays no attention to the visitor.

Scientific researchers almost unanimously agree that hormones help determine how people feel and act. Thus the male female differences are entirely genetic in nature. The passivity found in women is due to the particular nature of the female hormone. Differences between male and female hormones exist from birth; they are not acquired later, as would be the case if they stemmed from differences in environment.

The tenets of Islam are based wholly on nature. This is because Islam is the religion of nature. The laws Islam requires us to follow are, in fact, our own instinctive human requirements expressed in legal terms. And the teaching of Islam with respect to women are no exception. They too are based on nature. Modern, psychological, biological and anatomical research proves women to be more passive than men. This is the way their Maker has fashioned them. The nature of their womanhood, the special part they have to play in society, demand that they should be just as they have been – made that is, relatively delicate as compared to men.

It is this fact of nature on which Islamic teachings have been based. Because of women's delicate constitution, Islam teaches men to be gentle with them. That way they will not lose heart or become too despondent to perform their special duties in life. Women are not like iron and steel ribs, fragile and delicate. It is best to let them be, in their natural state. If one treats them as though they were tough metal, one will only break them.

(TO BE CONTINUED)

They will be of good cheer on meeting God

While still a young man, Talha ibn Bara' came to the Prophet to swear allegiance to him and to accept Islam, "I am at your behest," he vowed to the Prophet. "I will do exactly as you command." "Even if I tell you to sever your relations with your parents?" the Prophet asked. (Talha used to look after his mother with great affection). Talha ibn Bara' at once prepared himself to carry out the Prophet's command. "Talha," the Prophet said to him, "Our religion does not teach one to sever ties. I just wanted you to be absolutely certain of your faith."

Talha ibn Bara' came within the fold of Islam and remaining a fine Muslim till the day he died. When he was suffering his final illness, the Prophet came to visit him and found him in a state of unconsciousness. "I think that Talha's should' will be taken up tonight," he said. He departed then, asking to be informed when Talha regained consciousness.

It was midnight before he did so, and he said that the Prophet should not be disturbed at that late hour. "He might be bitten by some harmful creature, or some Jewish enemy might do him an injury if he comes out at night," he protested. Talha passed away that very night and the Prophet was not informed until after the morning prayer. The Prophet prayed, "Lord, meet him in such a way that both he and You are of good cheer on meeting each other."